Course Title: Creating Unforgettable, Believable Characters
Course Code: FICT 29
Instructor: Ron Nyren

A writer might start creating a character as a problem-solving exercise, creating the character's background, family situation, social life...but a character doesn't become compelling until problem solving drops away and the idea becomes organic, fleshy. For me, it's a matter of embodiment—really trying to crawl under the skin of a character. If the character isn't real for the writer, how can he or she be for the reader?

—Ann Cummins, author of Yellowcake

In my opinion, sometimes a novel tips over when a character becomes too well drawn, when you know everything, a lot more than you need to know, about a character. A character becomes compelling when there's enough mystery that the reader can fill in some blanks. In this way, the reader and the writer create the character together.

—Rabih Alameddine, author of An Unnecessary Woman

A Note from the Instructor
This course is designed to give you tools and inspiration for writing fiction with vivid, complex characters. In each class, I'll provide a handout focusing on a specific craft element (plot, point of view, setting, dialog, etc.), and we'll discuss strategies for employing these elements to illuminate the quirks and contradictions of the characters we create. In-class writing exercises will help you generate new material and practice new approaches (bring a notebook or laptop to class to write with). Along the way, we'll read a number of published short stories and discuss the ways they bring characters to life.

This course is for short story writers and novelists at any level, from those starting their first short story to those revising a novel in process. Everyone in the class will have the chance to turn in a story or novel chapter of their own, which we'll workshop together to explore possibilities for deepening character and building on the writer's strengths.

*Please see course page for full description and additional details.*

Grade Options and Requirements:
• Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)
  o Attendance (at least 8 of 10 class sessions)
  o Active participation in class discussions
  o Turning in piece for workshop

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• Credit (CR/NC)
  o Attendance (at least 6 of 10 class sessions)
  o Active participation in class discussions
• No Grade Requested (NGR)
  o This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.

*Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.

Turning in for Workshop:
When you turn in your story—up to 6,500 words—for workshop, please make copies for everyone. Make sure it is stapled, double-spaced, page-numbered, with margins of one inch, in a typeface that’s easy to read (like 12 point Times Roman).

Participation:
Since this is a discussion class/writing workshop, regular attendance is key. The class depends on you and the particular experiences and knowledge and ideas you bring. If an emergency prevents you from coming to class, please email me as soon as you can, before class if possible.

Textbook:
The Ecco Anthology of Contemporary American Short Fiction, edited by Joyce Carol Oates and Christopher R. Beha. Please read the readings before the week we’re discussing them.

Tentative Weekly Outline:

Week 1: Attitude
Questions: How can writers get to know their characters from the inside and gain a deeper sense of their motivations and opinions? How can characters’ attitudes and actions define and embody who they are?
• In-class writing exercise: The Five Things
• Readings for discussion: “Divination,” Ann Cummins; “Mrs. Turpin Reads the Stars,” Margot Livesey

Week 2: Plot
Questions: What gives a story a sense of urgency? How can writers arrange the events of a story so they deepen readers’ sense of a character and leave them with a feeling that something meaningful and irreversible has transpired?
• In-class writing exercise: Something Borrowed
• Readings for discussion: “Once in a Lifetime,” Jhumpa Lahiri

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**Week 3: The View through the Lens**
Questions: How does having a first-person narrator alter the nature of the story being told? With a third-person narrator, how do writers decide how closely to inhabit a character? How can writers invite readers to both inhabit characters and “see around” them?
- In-class writing exercise: The Speculative Narrator
- Readings for discussion: “Lavande,” Ann Beattie
- Workshop pieces

**Week 4: Scene: Shifting the Balance**
Questions: How can writers make each scene in a story feel compelling and end with a sense that something significant has happened? How can writers strategically use summary to advance swiftly through time and provide background information while keeping the reader gripped?
- In-class writing exercise: Balance of Power
- Readings for discussion: “Old Boys, Old Girls,” Edward P. Jones
- Workshop pieces

**Week 5: The Drama of Dialog**
Questions: How can dialog sound realistic while also advancing the story and revealing character? How can the subtext in what characters say to each other add narrative tension to scenes?
- In-class writing exercise: Interrogation
- Readings for discussion: “City Visit,” Adam Haslett; “Dialogue in Action,” from *Naked Playwriting: The Art, the Craft, the Life Laid Bare*, by William Missouri Downs and Robin U. Russin
- Workshop pieces

**Week 6: The Contradictions of Character**
Questions: How can characters approach the complexity and unpredictability of real people? How do writers make them coherent while still acknowledging the mystery of human nature?
- In-class writing exercise: Outrunning the Critic
- Readings for discussion: “Aurora,” Junot Díaz
- Workshop pieces

**Week 7: The Weight of the Past**
Questions: What are the different ways to reveal what happened before the time period of the story? How does the intrusion of the past influence characters’ actions in the present?
- In-class writing exercise: DÉJÀ VU
- Readings for discussion: “Disaster Stamps of Pluto,” Louise Erdrich
- Workshop pieces
Week 8: Shaped by Place
Questions: How can a story’s particular time and place help shape the plot and characters? How can writers infuse a story with vivid, significant details that deepen the character portrayal without bogging down the story?
  • In-class writing exercise: Encounters with the Unknown
  • Readings for discussion: “Ranch Girl,” Maile Meloy
  • Workshop pieces

Week 9: Style & Voice
Questions: How do writers find and refine their own individual style? How can they expand their stylistic range while still remaining true to their own voice?
  • In-class writing exercise: Possession
  • Readings for discussion: “Paper Losses” Lorrie Moore
  • Workshop pieces

Week 10: Images Build the World
Questions: How do writers paint a world so rich in sensory details (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell) that readers feel they’re “in” the story? How do writers select and refine details that best support the story? How can images resonate with and embody emotions, memories, ideas, and themes?
  • In-class writing exercise: Home
  • Readings for discussion: “The Girl Who Left Her Sock on the Floor,” Deborah Eisenberg
  • Workshop pieces

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